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AUTHOR White, Brenda
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ABSTRACT

One of eight papers from Project Seed, this paper considers the difficulties many parents experience when talking to their children about sex. It describes a program that responds to how, when, and what to say to children about sexuality by involving both parents and children in four 2-hour evening workshop sessions on building communication skills around issues of sexuality. Included in the workshops described are not only information on puberty, but also information on sex and gender roles, peer/family conflict, and consequences of early sexual activity. It is noted that the workshop is offered to all fifth-grade students and their parents, and that participation is voluntary. The first two workshop sessions described are for parents only, while the last two involve parents and children together. Anticipated outcomes of the workshops are described and procedures and instructions are discussed. Resources needed for the workshops are considered and total program expenses are estimated to be between $100 and $500 for facilitator fees, paper/postage, childcare workers, and refreshments. (NB)

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"PARENT/CHILD COMMUNICATIONS ON SEXUALITY ISSUES"

Brenda White
Mast Landing School
116 Bow Street, Freeport, ME 04032
(207) 865-4749
(207) 783-9703 (ME-Link)

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PARENT / CHILD COMMUNICATIONS ON SEXUALITY ISSUES

Most parents feel awkward talking to their children about sex, yet most young people view their parents as their primary source of information about sexuality issues. This project responds to "how", "when", and "what" to say to children about sexuality. In four two-hour evening workshop sessions, parents and children work with a facilitator on building communication skills around these issues. This is not a lecture series. The workshop goes beyond the facts about puberty to issues of sex and gender roles, peer/family conflict, and consequences of early sexual activity. Skill-building activities employ role play, and small and large group interactions to raise questions, fears, concerns, and values. Parents and children practice active listening and using "I" messages to initiate and sustain healthy dialogue. This workshop expands the classroom sexuality education and provides an innovative approach to prevention education through a partnership between parents and schools.

PARTICIPANTS

This workshop is offered to all fifth-grade students and their parents. Since classroom sexuality education begins in fourth grade, the students are in their second year of this unit and more comfortable with the topic. The program would be appropriate for sixth graders if classroom education began in fifth. Participation is voluntary and not a classroom requirement. In larger school systems, more than one workshop series may need to be offered to accommodate the numbers enrolled and still maintain the interactive design of the workshop. As many as 40 families have participated in one workshop series. The first two sessions are for parents only; the last two involve parents with their fifth grade child. Since both parents are encouraged to attend, childcare is provided onsite. An experienced family-life educator knowledgeable in communication skills and group process is essential. This could be the classroom educator in some schools. The facilitator establishes a safe, non-threatening climate that acknowledges the mutual awkwardness and predictable barriers to discussing sexuality, but supports parents as the primary sexuality educators of their children. The fifth-grade classroom teacher / sexuality educator should also be present at each session as a resource person to address any questions about classroom curriculum.

OUTCOMES

This workshop does not provide a prescription of sexual behaviors. Facilitating communication skills does allow families to strengthen social relationships, clarify responsibilities, explore values, express feelings, develop problem-solving strategies . . . and ultimately enhance self-esteem and prevent early onset of sexual activity and it's consequences. During the workshops, both parents and students become more comfortable having frank open discussions about sexuality issues both within and outside their own family; and they learn to recognize and respect one anothers opinions and differences. The workshop provides parents with a support network, information resources, and the skill and confidence to impact the knowledge and attitudes of their children. Fifth graders are encouraged to use their parents as a resource, and learn to make decisions about their own behavior . . . decisions that promote healthy lifestyles

PROCEDURES AND INSTRUCTIONS

The initial planning over 3-6 months should include the administrator, classroom sexuality educator, parents, and possibly students and local professionals such as physician, minister, and representative from health curriculum committee. A search for a facilitator should

be the first priority through school, DECS, Family Planning, and local agencies. The program and curriculum activities should be reviewed by the committee to tailor the workshop to the needs of the school, parents, and community. Publicity can be through organized parent meetings, school newsletters, and mailings to insure that all families receive notice of the workshop. Mailings should include a needs assessment or survey to clarify issues, and a registration slip to confirm interest and plan for space, materials, and childcare. There are no registration fees for families attending the workshop.

RESOURCES

The school facilities easily accommodate rooms for large group meetings and smaller breakout groups and onsite childcare. Resource curricula may be available through UMF-HERC, SEICUS, or Family Planning. Written materials, activities, and handouts can be prepared in packets for parents. Additional pamphlets are available through Family Planning, Red Cross, and personal products companies. Audiovisual aids and equipment may be needed for some activities. In some rural areas carpool options might be considered. Total program expenses ($100-$500) will cover facilitator fees, paper/postage, childcare workers (possible high school students), and refreshments. A variety of funding

sources have supported this workshop locally - the PTC, a local service organization, and Drug Free School Funds.

CONCLUSION

PARENT / CHILD COMMUNICATIONS ON SEXUALITY ISSUES provides parents with the skills and confidence to conduct open discussions with their children about relationships, sexuality, puberty, teen pregnancy, AIDS, and homophobia. Preadolescence is an opportune time for this workshop; 5th grade students are like siphons taking in information from all sources. It helps parents and children explore their own values related to sexuality and teaches respect for others' opinions. For four years, participants have unanimously endorsed the continuation of the program. The project has been successfully adapted in surrounding towns and would have equal value throughout the state. The collaboration between parents and schools serves as a prevention model for the whole community.

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